

## Taco Bell's game-changing litigation PR strategy

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Earlier this year, a small law firm in Alabama grabbed national headlines by filing a lawsuit against Taco Bell asking them, "Where's the beef?" Their suit claimed the meat contained in its tacos couldn't, in good conscience, be called beef given only 36% is true meat and the majority a mysterious "filler." Something very interesting happened as a result of this lawsuit—a new corporate communications paradigm may have been created.

Immediately after the firm filed its case, it quite nimbly launched into an aggressive, multi-faceted PR campaign in efforts to bring Taco Bell to its knees and settle. Press releases were filed; consumer interest reporters across the country were pitched; influential bloggers were contacted—all in an effort to disseminate mere allegations to support their claims. Taco Bell, however, did not sit idly by.

Rather than offer the traditional "no comment" corporate response, outraged, Taco Bell fought back with an equally aggressive and arguably more creative campaign. Out of the box, Taco Bell took out full-page advertisements in the nation's marquee print and online media. Ads appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and several online outlets with a very simple message—"Thank you for suing us"—creating a novel, engaging, comical platform to refute the scurrilous allegations made against them.

Such a strategy was a game-changer; the tide quickly turned. Following the ads, Taco Bell launched its own multi-faceted PR counter-offensive, turning to the viral world of social media to engage with consumers in a whole new way. The results were staggering. The YouTube video Taco Bell president and CCO Greg Creed posted days after the suit was filed revealing the beef "secret recipe" has since been viewed over 240,000 times, receiving 900 'likes' on Facebook. Its Twitter account, @TacoBell, quickly exploded into the Twittersphere, with the company tweeting 'Thank You' daily and actively engaging in conversations with its more than 123,000 followers. Perhaps most effective was Taco Bell's interesting promotions devised to counter the claims of the case. It launched an offer of 88-cent Crunchwrap Supremes to embrace the "88% premium beef" in its recipe; announced the "World's Largest Taco Giveaway," giving 10 million free tacos (beef, of course) to Facebook fans; and gave 600 free tee-shirts to Facebook fans who filled out a feedback form. It's no surprise that today Taco Bell boasts more than 6 million Facebook fans.

Following a crescendo of favorable press for Taco Bell, the law firm relented, falling on their sword and openly acknowledging Taco Bell's aggressive tactics made them aware that their claims had no merit. A spokesperson from the law firm (Beasley Allen's attorney Dee Miles) said the charges were dropped because of Taco Bell's "changes regarding disclosure and marketing of its 'seasoned beef' product." Revealing its 'secret recipe' and emphasizing the quality of its beef through various PR strategies made the bell ring loud and clear in Taco Bell's favor. Putting the nail in the coffin with one last wink, Taco Bell bought another series of ads which simply and elegantly asked the law firm: "Would it kill you to say you're sorry?"

Taking a step back, Taco Bell's willingness to embrace aggressive litigation PR tactics, not only ruled the day for its case but also arguably saved the company's brand. More broadly, however, the case gives corporate America some very important lessons to learn—and, perhaps, a new paradigm to follow. We learned that in the rapid-fire media age in which we live, where the dialogue about brands can evolve in less than a moment's notice, creativity and quick reactions count. "No comment," no response strategies for corporate America in the face of potentially damaging claims against brands need reconsideration. While Taco Bell's response is an extreme example and full-page ads in the major dailies may not spell success in most cases, simpler tactics might even do the trick. Addressing claims head-on,

launching creative campaigns to keep your brand alive and thriving, embracing social media, and engaging with consumers in new ways are key takeaways from Taco Bell's secret recipe. In the face of high-profile litigation, corporate America should take a page out of Taco Bell's litigation PR playbook and should not be afraid to “Think Outside The Bun.”

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